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## **India's Policy of Non-alignment in World Politics since Independence – A Review**

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### **Abstract:**

*India's non-alignment policy, a cornerstone since independence, has shaped its global stance. Rooted in pragmatism and autonomy, this policy aimed to navigate the Cold War's ideological tides while preserving sovereignty. India's leadership, including Nehru, sought to foster ties with diverse nations, avoiding bloc alignment. Non-alignment facilitated economic development, bolstered regional stability, and championed autonomy, peace, and cooperation. Today, while not strictly non-aligned, India maintains strategic autonomy, engaging in multilateral diplomacy and partnerships. Upholding its tradition, India navigates complex geopolitics, emphasizing inclusive global development and safeguarding its interests on a rapidly changing international stage.*

**Key Words: Non-alignment, Superpowers, Bipolarism, Terrorism, Strategic autonomy.**

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The 19<sup>th</sup> Non-Aligned Movement summit is scheduled to be held in the East African state of Uganda at the end of 2023 and as a member-state of the NAM India is going to participate in this summit. India was one of the founding member-states of the Non-alignment Movement and has been following the policy of non-alignment in world politics since independence. In this long journey, India has witnessed many ups and downs in world politics and has regulated her foreign policy accordingly. In this paper, attempts have been made to understand and review India's perspective and stand in implementing the non-aligned policy in world politics throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and early of 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

The year 1947 marked the dawn of a new era for India as it threw off the shackle of British colonial rule and became independent. Although from the beginning it was not easy for India to secure its position in world politics as an independent nation. Oppression and exploitation during the long colonial rule had almost drained the vitality of Mother India. Partition on the eve of independence left a permanent scar on India. It fuelled communalism which brought the refugee crisis to the surface and put a strain on the Indian economy as well as on society. Therefore, in the initial year of independence, the very big challenge for the leaders of India was to restore the peace of the nation which was a prerequisite for

development (G.C.Thomas 1979). Jawaharlal Nehru who became the first prime minister of India was certain of the fact that only economic development could solve all the problems and would bring prosperity to the nation. So that he was keen to adopt such a foreign policy for India which would restore peace and be favourable for the development of the nation. In this context, Nehru found the policy of non-alignment as an idealistic policy for India.

Not only the internal factors led Nehru to pursue the policy of non-alignment but contemporary international affairs also pushed him to adopt such foreign policy. After the second world war, two global developments took place in world politics. The first development was the resurgence of the Afro-Asian countries like India which had just freed itself from colonial rule and the second development was the emergence of the United States and the Soviet Union (U.S.S.R) as Superpowers in world politics which ushered bipolarism in the global politics. Both the superpowers had their different ideologies and tried to exert their influence on a global scale through military alliances. Therefore, the second development once again led the world to the brink of war. The Afro-Asian countries could not get involved in the tussle between the two power blocks. They had shared a common interest to keep themselves away from the two power blocks and tended to formulate their independent policy in the international arena. Therefore, they leaned towards the non-aligned foreign policy.

Nehru's interest in adopting the non-aligned foreign policy for India was not grown all of a sudden. He had been cherishing this idealistic policy long before the independence of India. The origin of the non-aligned policy can be traced in the speeches of Nehru and the documents of the Indian National Congress throughout the 1930s. However, after the independence, it became essential for Nehru to adopt this policy as he set his goal to establish India as a world power. Nehru knew that India could not achieve this by military power, therefore, he was seeking international cooperation and, in this regard, the non-aligned policy became an effective tool. Initially, in the 1940s, Nehru tried to organise an Asian front against the superpowers and neo-imperialistic domination of the West. Later in the fifties, the non-aligned policy attracted African countries and therefore an Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung was convened in 1955. Although the conference failed to build an Afro-Asian front due to the differences that arose among the participating states on the issue of anti-imperialism still the non-aligned movement gained momentum after this. However, in the initial phase, Nehru was one of the key figures of NAM and under his leadership peace, disarmament, anti-colonialism, anti-racism and international cooperation occupied centre stage in the movement. In 1961, the first NAM summit was convened at Belgrade to address the issues that arose in the Bandung Conference and to express its faith in the policy of peaceful co-existence. Since the Belgrade Conference, the NAM summit conferences have been convened from time to time to discuss several issues and problems of the member states and third-world countries.

During the prime ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru (1947–1964) India's stand in implementing the non-aligned foreign policy was sturdy. Although sometimes Nehru also

found it very difficult to implement the policy of non-alignment in its true form. Since he cherished some pro-Soviet vision, the Soviet influence on him was visible in his economic planning for the development of India. However, India had a democratic structure in the domestic set-up, therefore, it was not easy for Nehru to reject the ideology of the Western bloc either. Indeed, India was not in a position to reject the ideology of both Superpowers (Harshe 1990). In this context, Nehru became desperate to enhance international cooperation worldwide to get all kinds of assistance from various nations. Therefore, India was successful in attracting financial and technical assistance from the developed countries throughout the 1950s and 1960s and by 1960 India had managed to receive some 70 million dollars in support from the World Bank. (Malone 2011) The policy of non-alignment would also allow India to minimize defence expenditures and reduce the chance of war. Although India was not in a position to engage in a costly war, she could not avoid war at the regional level (Karnad 2002). Since independence, Nehru was more concerned about Pakistan than the Republic of China. Indeed, he never saw the Republic of China as a threat to the nation. But the Indo-China war of 1962 over border issues disillusioned him. India's defeat in this war not only humiliated the nation but also adversely affected the policy of non-alignment. The war forced Nehru to sought for the assistance of the United States and it somehow undermined his non-alignment policy. Nehru's domestic critics also got a chance to raise their voices against his policy. Despite these challenges, Nehru had an uncompromised attitude towards his policy and therefore, he tended to redefine his policy. After the war, he increased the defence budget for security reasons and India continued a normal relationship with both the United States and the Soviet Union for executing the rearmament and development plan. Although Nehru's redefined non-alignment policy has been criticised by many. Michael Brecher has observed this as India's departure from the principle of "equidistance", in relation to Superpowers to "equal proximity" to Moscow and Washington. (Brecher 1979-1980)

After the Indo-China war, it became evident that India could not abstain from taking sides in the future for security reasons. Therefore, the trend of redefining the non-alignment policy continued in the post-Nehru era. Although the Indo-China war increased India's dependency on the United States, it did not last long for a sudden American rapprochement with China and Pakistan. The second Indo-Pak war of 1965 widened the gap between India and the United States as the latter supplied military equipment to Pakistan. And the relations between the two further deteriorated during the third Indo-Pak war in 1971 when the then Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi, daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, signed a treaty of peace, friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union for 20 years. And it was a clear indication of India's departure from the policy of non-alignment. The US-China-Pakistan détente pushed India to deepen her relationship with the Soviet Union. It also helped India to secure its position as a regional power. (Mansingh 1984)

In the 1970s, under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, India's dependency on the Soviet Union reached its zenith. In this period India had increased its arms purchasing capacity at an unprecedented level and purchasing a huge amount of defence equipment from the

Soviet Union depleted the foreign exchange reserves of the state (Smith 1994). Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (1984-89) tried to reduce India's dependency on the Soviet Union during his regime. He had shown interest in building a warm relationship with the United States. The United States also welcomed his liberal economic policies. Still, all these could not succeed in cutting off India from Soviet influence. The relationship between India and the United States remained tenuous until the end of the Cold War.

The Cold War ended by 1990 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the development of a new world order. Russian Federation was recognised as the successor state of the former Soviet Union and by 1992, the United States emerged as the most dominant military and economic power which led to the end of the bipolarism in world politics. Japan and Germany had also emerged as economic giants at the global level. These changes at the international level raised questions on the relevance of India's adherence to the policy of non-alignment. Although prime Minister Narasimha Rao (1991-96), owing to the importance of the non-alignment policy in taking independent decisions in foreign affairs, reaffirmed India's adherence to the policy (Kumar 1993). The Deva Gowda Government (1996-97) also confirmed India's continued belief in non-alignment. But after the end of the Cold War India was required to update her strategy according to the transformation that took place at the international level. The liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s was a major development in this context. It not only made India's ties with the US strong but also brought changes in defence relationships with other nations. By the end of the 1990s, India had secured defence agreements with Italy, South Africa, the UK and the US. India had also shown its strong and independent stand on the question of the signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996. Although India's refusal to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and carry out a nuclear weapon test in 1998 had opened up a rift in the relationship with the US, the Kargil War in 1999 shrunk the gap between the two. In this war, the United States for the first time supported India against Pakistan.

The cooperative relationship between the US and India continued in the 2000s. Both countries encountered terrorist attacks and witnessed the evilness of terrorism during this period. Their common interest in counter-terrorism deepened the bilateral relations. The bilateral cooperation helped India to retain its position as a regional power and it also protected the US interest of balancing the powers in Asia as the US was concerned about the rise of China. The United States had also extended its support in India's nuclear programme which unveiled a framework for nuclear cooperation in 2005 and the US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement was signed in 2008. It gave India the recognition of being a responsible nuclear weapon state.

India did not undermine the importance of bilateral relations with the United States in the 2010s. But India had been showing its greater interest in following strategic autonomy<sup>1</sup> from the beginning of the 2010s decade. India's inclination towards strategic autonomy was

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<sup>1</sup> Strategic autonomy is a policy which enables a state to pursue its national interests and adopt its preferred foreign policy without being constrained in any manner by other states. – S. Kalyanaraman  
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visible in the act of maintaining a balanced relationship with China and Russia in the early 2010s. India kept itself out from intervening in Syria's civil war and the Ukraine crisis during this period. India also had a concern about the rise of China and its increasing presence in the neighbourhood. The growing tension between the United States and Russia over Syria and Ukraine brought China closer to Russia in this decade. The overwhelming influence of China on the neighbouring state of Pakistan also added to Indian apprehension. The multidimensional threat from China pushed India to extend and deepen its bilateral cooperation with Japan, South Korea and Australia. Thus, despite having the urge to follow strategic autonomy, India could not avoid taking substantial steps towards the United States and America's allies in the Asia-Pacific region to deal with China.

The policy of non-alignment does not promote neutrality in world politics rather it has a dynamic character and therefore, non-aligned countries like India are not following isolationist policies. India's non-alignment as an instrument of foreign policy has been changing qualitatively at different stages from its inception. In the beginning, Nehru adopted the policy of non-alignment to survive and negotiate with a world that was getting dragged into the politics of the cold war (Nehru 1983). Nehru's desire for pursuing an independent foreign policy and promoting peace and security in the nation shaped the concept of non-aligned policy. The policy evolved through its continuous interactions with the domestic conditions and external environment (Harshe 1990). The policy faced a crisis several times and required redefining from time to time. Therefore, the context in which India adopted the non-aligned policy in the past has changed considerably in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After the end of the Cold War, world politics had been undergoing a rapid transformation and to keep up with these changes India has revealed its redefined foreign and strategic policy under the document titled *Nonalignment 2.0* in 2012. We find echoes of Nehru's non-alignment in this policy as it emphasises the internal development of the nation for legitimizing its power in the world. This policy set its goal for India to retain maximum strategic autonomy to pursue its own developmental goal. It suggests that India would be benefited most if she keeps an equal distance from the United States and China and pursue a friendly relationship with these major powers. Thus, the document has clearly shown India's reliance on the non-alignment policy as it helped India to keep itself immune from the complexities of world politics in the past. Although in the context of China's remarkable rise in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, India's policy of non-alignment may not be proved sufficient for realizing its dream of becoming a regional as well as global power. Therefore, the Modi government showed its reluctance to follow the non-alignment policy. The indication of a departure from the old practice of balancing relations could be seen in Narendra Modi's assertive approach towards China in his first term as prime minister (2014-19). At present India is showing signs of pursuing strategic autonomy separately from non-alignment under Narendra Modi. (Pant and Super 2015)

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